DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 871 HE 026 125

AUTHOR Sikula, Robin D.
TITLE Students in the Humanities.
INSTITUTION American Council on Education, Washington, D.C. Div. of Policy Analysis and Research.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 13p.
AVAILABLE FROM American Council on Education, One Dupont Circle, Suite 800, Washington, D.C. ($10; subscription $35 per year).
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)
JOURNAL CIT ACE Research Briefs; v3 n6 1992

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bachelors Degrees; Career Choice; College Freshmen; College Graduates; College Students; *Educational Trends; General Education; Graduate Study; Higher Education; *Humanities; Liberal Arts; Sex Differences; Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

This research brief examines the data on baccalaureate recipients in the humanities, especially the upward trend over the past 9 years. Highlighted findings include that: in 1971 the number of humanities degrees awarded peaked; this was followed by a decline of over 50% in the early 1980s; such degrees have been increasing since the low in 1983, and graduates in humanities have one of the highest levels of enrollment in graduate education. A look at the bachelors degrees conferred finds that the most common fields of study are English, history, and foreign languages and that women generally receive a greater percentage of the degrees granted than do men. Related trends include the following: freshmen aspirations have been reliable indicators of bachelor's degrees conferred; decreases in verbal scores on standardized tests may be linked to low numbers of humanities majors; and the decrease in humanities may be linked to increasing numbers of students majoring in business fields. Also briefly considered are strengthened general education requirements. Discussion of data on those who graduate in the humanities finds that they gravitate toward a wide variety of occupations with education being most popular and that initial earnings of humanities graduates are lower than those of business graduates. A final section discusses implications with emphasis on the relevance of the humanities in business and the general labor market. (A 27-item bibliography is attached.) (JB)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED353871

RESEARCH BRIEFS Volume 3, Number 6 • 1992

*Division of Policy Analysis and Research*
*American Council on Education, Washington, D.C*

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

ACE, Div of Policy Analysis and Research

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

# Students in the Humanities

**Robin D. Sikula**

While much attention has been focused on student enrollment and graduation rates in the sciences and engineering, few comprehensive studies have been done recently on students in the humanities fields. A common perception within the academic community is that earned degrees in the humanities are in decline. Yet the most recent data available show promising trends for humanities degrees.

Over the past three decades, the number of bachelor's degrees in the humanities has undergone tremendous fluctuation.[1] The mid-1960s and early 1970s were a period of enormous growth, which peaked at 133,000 degrees in 1971. This growth was followed by a precipitous decline into the early 1980s, with humanities degrees falling to 60,000 in 1983. Since then, the number of humanities degrees has been rising slowly—over 80,000 humanities degrees were conferred in 1990.

This research brief examines the data on baccalaureate recipients in the humanities, especially the upward trend over the past nine years. How do current numbers of degrees compare with the sharp declines of the preceding decade? What are the reasons behind these changes? What are the implications of these changes for higher education and society?

## HIGHLIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS

- In 1971, the number of humanities degrees peaked marking the end of approximately ten years of extraordinary growth.
  - — This surge was followed by a decline in which the number of humanities degrees dropped by over 50 percent.
- Over the last decade, the number of humanities degrees has been slowly but steadily rising. In 1981, colleges and universities awarded 65,000 bachelor's degrees in the humanities; in 1990, slightly more than 80,000 such degrees were awarded.
- This represents a 24 percent increase in the number of humanities baccalaureates. By comparison, during this same period, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in all fields rose 12 percent.
- The proportion of bachelor's degrees awarded in the humanities has changed little over the past nine years. Humanities degrees represented 8 percent of all bachelor's degrees earned in 1990 up one percent from 1981.
- Almost three-quarters of humanities degrees are earned in two fields. English and history comprised 73 percent of the humanities bachelor's degrees in 1990.
- Women earned nearly six in ten humanities bachelor's degrees in 1990, the same proportion as in 1981.
  - — Art and music history, foreign languages, and linguistics have especially high concentrations of women receiving degrees. Seventy percent or more of the degrees in these fields go to women.
- Among freshmen, interest in the humanities is up, but remains well below the peak levels of the late 1960s. In 1991, 12 percent of freshmen expressed interest in majoring in the humanities. In contrast, 24 percent of freshmen intended to major in the humanities in 1966.
- Humanities graduates have one of the highest levels of enrollment in graduate education. Thirty-eight percent of 1986 humanities bac-

*Robin D. Sikula is a research assistant in the Division of Policy Analysis and Research at the American Council on Education.*

HE026125



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

calaureate recipients enrolled in graduate study, compared to 28 percent of all 1986 bachelor's degree recipients.

- Among recent college graduates who were not working, more than half (57 percent) were enrolled in graduate programs. The same was true of humanities graduates; 55 percent of those without jobs were attending graduate school.
- Graduates in the humanities and social sciences exceeded business, engineering, and math/science graduates in problem-solving creativity, intellectual ability, range of interests, decision-making, and written communication skills.
- The general skills associated with study of the traditional liberal arts are becoming increasingly valuable in the workforce as managers take on greater social and political roles.
- Some of the renewed interest in the humanities can be attributed to the strong economy of the 1980s. When job prospects look favorable, students are more apt to choose a field without fear of underemployment after graduation.
  - —Continuing into the economically-turbulent nineties, it remains to be seen whether the current upward trend in the humanities will persist.
- Growing financial pressures at colleges and universities nationwide may possibly lead to reductions in the availability and allocation of resources. Institutions need to reassess their commitment to liberal learning and how that commitment may be effected in a period of financial difficulty.

## Bachelor's Degrees Conferred

Over the last three decades, bachelor's degrees in the humanities have undergone notable changes (figure 1).

- In 1971, the peak year, 133,311 humanities degrees were conferred at the baccalaureate level. This was followed by a steep decline through 1982.
- In 1981, higher education institutions awarded 64,878 bachelor's degrees in the humanities—a decline of more than 50 percent from ten years earlier.
- By 1990, humanities degrees were on the rise; slightly more than 80,300 humanities bachelor's degrees were awarded in that year. This represents an increase of 24 percent since 1981.
  - —Between 1981 and 1990, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in all fields rose 12 percent.

Despite the substantial growth in humanities degrees, the proportion of all bachelor's degrees that were awarded in the humanities changed very little. Other fields, such as business, had somewhat larger gains in their share of all degrees.

- Humanities degrees represented 8 percent of all bachelor's degrees in 1990, up one percent from 1981. By comparison, during these years, the share of all bachelor's degrees awarded in business fields rose from 21 to 24 percent.
- The number of humanities baccalaureates awarded in 1990 was still 40 percent below the record number of humanities degrees awarded in 1971.
  - —The total number of bachelor's degrees awarded increased by 25 percent between 1971 and 1990.
- In 1971, one in six bachelor's degrees was earned in the humanities. In 1990, one in thirteen bachelor's degrees was in the humanities.

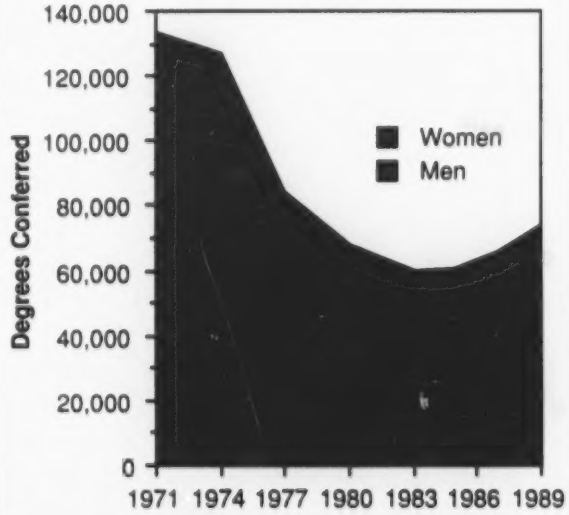
### *FIELD OF STUDY*

The most common fields of study among the humanities are English, history, and foreign languages (table 1).

- In 1990, English and history comprised 73 percent of bachelor's degrees awarded in the humanities.[2]
- English accounts for the largest number of humanities bachelor's degrees; more than four in ten (45 percent) humanities baccalaureates went to English majors in 1990.
- More than 36,000 English baccalaureate degrees were earned in 1990, compared to 25,000 in 1981.

**Figure 1**

Bachelor's Degrees Conferred, by Gender, 1971-1989




**Source:** National Center for Education Statistics, HEGIS and IPEDS data, and selected years from the Digest of Education Statistics.

The number of degrees awarded in English has risen dramatically since the early 1980s, growing by 44 percent, by far the greatest increase among the humanities.

History degrees comprise the second largest segment of humanities degrees.

- More than one-quarter (28 percent) of humanities degrees were in history. Between 1981 and 1990, the number of history majors increased 21 percent.
- Foreign languages accounted for another 14 percent of humanities degrees. However, only moderate growth (7 percent) occurred in the number of foreign language majors during the 1980s. This is surprising, given the growing internationalization of campuses today (El-Khawas, 1992).
- Philosophy/religion was one of the few areas that continued to decline over the 1980s. Over a nine-year period, majors in these two fields decreased by 8 percent.
- Linguistics baccalaureate degrees also declined somewhat, falling by 5 percent (from 551 to 524 degrees conferred) during these years.

### *DIFFERENCES BY GENDER*

Women generally receive a greater percentage of the degrees granted in the humanities, although there are some marked exceptions.

- About six in ten humanities bachelor's degrees were earned by women in 1990, the same proportion as in 1981.

Art and music history, foreign languages, and linguistics have especially high concentrations of women degree recipients. Seventy percent or more of degrees in these fields go to women.

- Between 1981 and 1990, the number of women earning music and art history degrees in-

**Table 1**

Bachelor's Degrees for Selected Fields, 1981 and 1990

| | 1980-81 | | 1989-90 | | Percent Change |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Field** | **Total** | **Percent** | **Total** | **Percent** | **1981-1990** |
| **Humanities Degrees** | **64,878** | **100.0%** | **80,393** | **100.0%** | **23.9%** |
| Men | 28,122 | 43.3% | 33,723 | 41.9% | 19.9% |
| Women | 36,756 | 56.7% | 46,670 | 58.1% | 27.0% |
| **Foreign Languages** | **10,548** | **16.3%** | **11,326** | **14.1%** | **7.4%** |
| Men | 2,550 | 9.1% | 3,010 | 8.9% | 18.0% |
| Women | 7,998 | 21.8% | 8,316 | 17.8% | 4.0% |
| **English, general** | **23,157** | **35.7%** | **34,135** | **42.5%** | **47.4%** |
| Men | 7,634 | 27.1% | 10,825 | 32.1% | 41.8% |
| Women | 15,523 | 42.2% | 23,310 | 49.9% | 50.2% |
| **Literature** | **2,233** | **3.4%** | **2,405** | **3.0%** | **7.7%** |
| Men | 866 | 3.1% | 783 | 2.3% | -9.6% |
| Women | 1,367 | 3.7% | 1,622 | 3.5% | 18.7% |
| **Classics** | **403** | **0.6%** | **454** | **0.6%** | **12.7%** |
| Men | 203 | 0.7% | 211 | 0.6% | 3.9% |
| Women | 200 | 0.5% | 243 | 0.5% | 21.5% |
| **Linguistics** | **551** | **0.8%** | **524** | **0.7%** | **-4.9%** |
| Men | 143 | 0.5% | 149 | 0.4% | 4.2% |
| Women | 408 | 1.1% | 375 | 0.8% | -8.1% |
| **Philosophy/Religion** | **7,428** | **11.4%** | **6,848** | **8.5%** | **-7.8%** |
| Men | 4,833 | 17.2% | 4,374 | 13.0% | -9.5% |
| Women | 2,595 | 7.1% | 2,474 | 5.3% | -4.7% |
| **History*** | **18,487** | **28.5%** | **22,319** | **27.8%** | **20.7%** |
| Men | 11,441 | 40.7% | 13,935 | 41.3% | 21.8% |
| Women | 7,046 | 19.2% | 8,384 | 18.0% | 19.0% |
| **Art & Music History** | **2,071** | **3.2%** | **2,382** | **3.0%** | **15.0%** |
| Men | 452 | 1.6% | 436 | 1.3% | -3.5% |
| Women | 1,619 | 4.4% | 1,946 | 4.2% | 20.2% |

*Includes 65 Archaeology degrees in 1981 and 87 in 1990.
**Source:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, unpublished data tabulations from IPEDS tapes.

## Table 2

Bachelor's Degrees in Humanities by Race/Ethnicity, 1981 to 1990*

| | 1980-81 | | 1989-90 | | Percent Change |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | Percent | Total | Percent | 1981-1990 |
| Total | 50,347 | 100.0% | 66,249 | 100.0% | 31.6% |
| White | 44,929 | 89.2% | 58,246 | 87.9% | 29.6% |
| Minority | 4,674 | 9.3% | 7,177 | 10.8% | 53.6% |
| African American | 2,273 | 4.5% | 2,597 | 3.9% | 14.3% |
| Hispanic | 1,603 | 3.2% | 2,566 | 3.9% | 60.1% |
| Asian American | 670 | 1.3% | 1,759 | 2.7% | 162.5% |
| American Indian | 128 | 0.3% | 255 | 0.4% | 99.2% |
| Nonresident Alien | 744 | 1.5% | 826 | 1.2% | 11.0% |

*Excludes History, Archaeology, Music and Art History degrees. Information on race/ethnicity is not collected for individual majors/fields.

**Source:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Racial/Ethnic Trends in Degrees Conferred by Institutions of Higher Education: 1980-81 through 1989-90, March 1992.*

creased by 20 percent, while the number earned by men declined by 4 percent.

- Interestingly, in foreign languages, most of the growth over the decade resulted from more men earning degrees.

  — Between 1981 and 1990, foreign language degrees awarded to men rose 18 percent, compared to a 4 percent increase among women.

- There was a small decrease overall in linguistics degrees. Women earned slightly fewer degrees in 1990 than in 1981 (375 versus 408); degrees earned by men held steady over this period.

More than two-thirds of English degrees are earned by women. Although both men and women earned more English degrees in 1990 than in 1981, women had a slightly larger increase (48 percent versus 37 percent).

Classics is the one humanities field with nearly equal representation among men and women.

- Of the 454 bachelor's degrees in classics granted in 1990, 243 were earned by women, 211 by men.

- Nearly all of the growth in classics degrees was among women. Women had a 22 percent increase in classics degrees between 1981 and 1990.

Bachelor's degrees are more likely to be earned by men in only two humanities fields: history and philosophy/religion.

- In 1990, men received 62 percent of the baccalaureate degrees in history and 64 percent in philosophy/religion. This distribution remained steady over the decade.

### *DIFFERENCES BY RACE AND ETHNICITY*

Very little data disaggregated by the race and ethnicity of students in the humanities is available.[3] What data is available show that the percentage of humanities baccalaureates earned by minority groups is slightly smaller than their percentage of all bachelor's degrees conferred. In 1990, minorities earned 13 percent of all bachelor's degrees, and 11 percent of humanities bachelor's degrees.

- In 1990, the majority (88 percent) of bachelor's degrees in the humanities were earned by white students (table 2).

- Among racial/ethnic groups, African American and Hispanic students both received 4 percent of humanities bachelor's degrees; Asian Americans, 3 percent; nonresident aliens, 1 percent; and American Indians, less than one-half of 1 percent.

- A similar distribution among racial/ethnic groups existed in 1981. Eighty-nine percent of humanities bachelor's degrees went to whites, 5 percent to African Americans, 3 percent to Hispanics. Nonresident aliens earned 2 percent of humanities baccalaureates; Asian Americans, 1 percent; and American Indians, less than one-half of 1 percent.

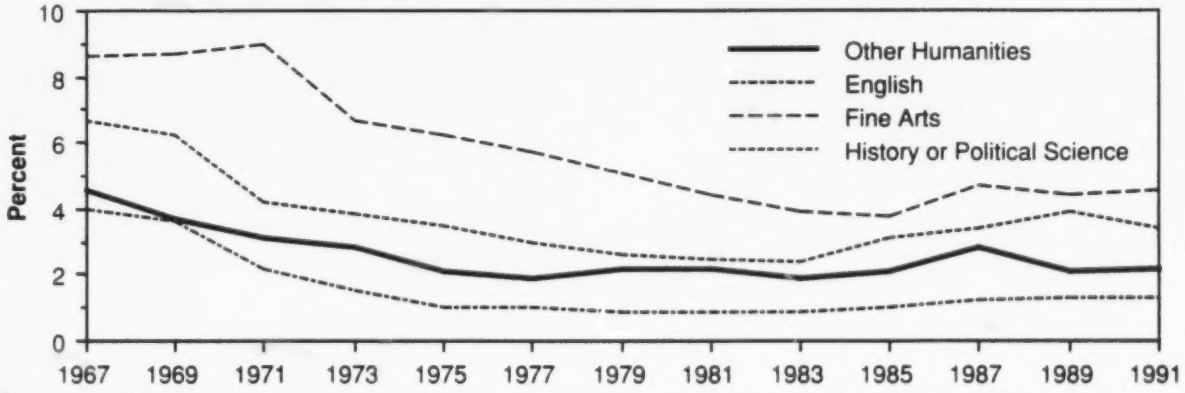
Between 1981 and 1990, the number of humanities bachelor's degrees increased among all racial/ethnic groups.

- African Americans had the lowest increase over the period, earning only about 300 more humanities degrees in 1990 than in 1981. They were the only minority group to earn a smaller percentage of humanities baccalaureates in 1990 than in 1981.

- The number of humanities degrees earned by Asian Americans more than doubled, from 670 to 1,759. This is partly a result of Asian Americans' increased enrollment in higher education over these years. However, it did not raise Asian Americans' share of humanities degrees by more than two percent.

## Figure 2

Freshman Interest in Humanities Majors, 1967-1991




**Source:** Dey, Astin, and Korn. *The American Freshman: Twenty-Five Year Trends.* Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, Los Angeles, September, 1991.

The racial/ethnic breakdown of humanities baccalaureates by gender does not differ from the overall trends. Among all races/ethnicities, women earned almost twice as many humanities degrees as did men in 1990.

- Most significantly, African American women earned two and a half times as many humanities bachelor's degrees as African American men (1,820 compared with 777).

## Related Trends

### *FRESHMAN INTEREST*

Many of these same trends are evident in the degree interests of first-time full-time freshmen. Freshman degree aspirations, gathered through an annual survey begun in 1966, have been reliable indicators of bachelor's degrees conferred. Aspirations to major in the humanities fell drastically between 1966 and 1983; since then, however, there has been renewed interest in the humanities fields (figure 2).

- In 1966, 24 percent of freshmen expressed interest in majoring in one of the humanities fields (including political science). By 1983, the figure had fallen to 9 percent. In 1991, 12 percent of freshmen indicated an interest in majoring in the humanities.
- Freshman interest in English had one of the largest declines among the humanities, falling by 80 percent from 1966 to its low point in 1982 (4.4 percent to 0.8 percent).

However, English appears to be one field where freshmen degree aspirations do not accurately portray students' final choice of major.

- In a follow-up study of the 1986 respondents four years later, the percentage of students majoring in English had increased from 2 percent to almost 4 percent.
  - — This is close to the peak level in 1966, in which 4.4 percent of students expected to major in English.

Freshman interest in history followed a similar trend over the years. Again, by the fourth year of college, the percentage of history majors was much higher than indications of intent from the freshman survey.

- In 1977, approximately 1 percent of college freshmen reported history as their choice of major.[4] Interest in history majors declined to one-half of 1 percent of freshmen in 1982, but returned to 1 percent in 1991.
- In 1986, 1 percent of freshmen at four-year schools were interested in pursuing a history major. Four years later, approximately three times as many of these students were majoring in history.

Changes between first-year intentions and actual majors four years later were not evident for any of the other humanities fields. The trend was reversed in the business fields. The percentage of business majors in the follow-up study was slightly lower than the freshman survey had projected four years earlier.

- Twenty-three percent of freshmen in 1986 expected to major in business fields. Four years later, 20 percent of this cohort were actually business majors.

### *ACADEMIC SKILLS*

One factor in the low numbers of humanities undergraduates may be the general decline in verbal skills, as measured by the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Because the humanities typically are verbal-intensive fields, students may be reluctant to major in these disciplines.

- The average score on the verbal component of the test has declined over the past twenty-five years. In 1967 it was 466; by 1980, it had fallen to 424. Despite

a minor surge in the mid-1980s, the average was 422 in 1991 (*Digest of Education Statistics, 1992*).

- In a comparison of scores by intended majors, prospective humanities majors had an average verbal score much higher than the average for all examinees (515 versus 428). These potential humanities majors had the second highest verbal scores, surpassed only by prospective physics majors, who averaged 539 (Johnston, 1989).

### *STUDENT ATTITUDES*

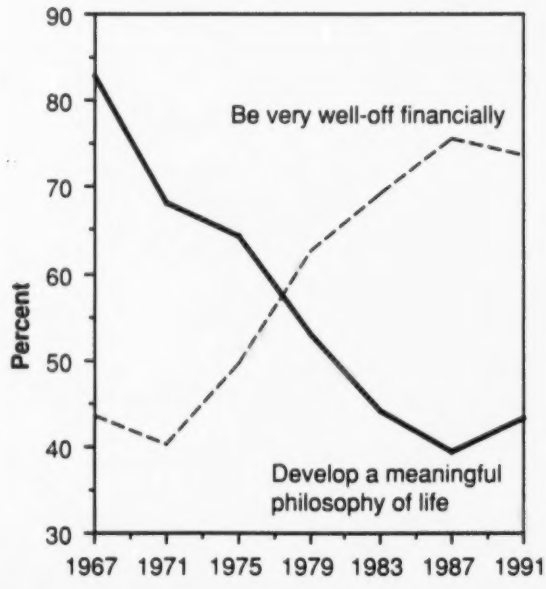
The decline in humanities majors appear to be linked to increasing numbers of students majoring in business fields. Students and parents generally view a business major as better preparation for the labor market, especially when the economy is weak. Some of the renewed interest in the humanities can be attributed to the strong economy of the 1980s. When job prospects look favorable, students are more apt to consider fields without fear of underemployment after graduation (Useem, 1989).

Students' life goals also play a role in choosing a major. Over the past twenty-five years, students have become increasingly concerned with their material welfare. At the same time, there has been a decline in the number of freshmen who believe it is important to develop a life philosophy (figure 3).

- In 1967, 83 percent of freshmen considered it important to develop a meaningful philosophy of life. In 1991, this was true for only 43 percent of freshmen.

**Figure 3**

Freshman Life Goals, 1967-1991




**Source:** Dey, Astin, and Korn. *The American Freshman: Twenty-Five Year Trends*. Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, Los Angeles, September, 1991.

- By comparison, being very well off financially was a goal for only 44 percent of students in 1967. In 1991, 74 percent of freshmen considered this important.

While this is circumstantial evidence at best, it does offer insight into the trends in degrees conferred. Economics and engineering majors have the highest average annual earnings, and humanities graduates generally are found at the lower end in a salary distribution chart of college graduates.

- In 1987, persons with a bachelor's degree in economics had mean monthly earnings of $2,756, compared to $1,346 for liberal arts and humanities graduates. English and journalism graduates reported mean monthly earnings of $1,431.

## General Education Requirements

One outcome of attention focused on the declining numbers of students in the humanities has been a strengthening of general education requirements. Curricular reform has centered on giving students a more integrated course of study without mandating a specific curriculum.

In 1989, the National Endowment for the Humanities published a report encouraging institutions to focus on general education requirements. It provided a plan for 50 hours of coursework, including 18 credit-hours in culture and civilization, 12 hours of foreign language, 8 hours of natural sciences, and 6 hours each of mathematics and social sciences (Cheney, 1989). Through a nationally-representative survey, campus administrators have indicated support for such expanded requirements (El-Khawas, 1990). According to this study:

- Thirty-nine percent of four-year institutions reported that they already had a 50 credit-hour requirement in place, and another 27 percent favored such requirements.
- Nine in ten baccalaureate colleges and comprehensive institutions required some general education core curriculum for all students, regardless of major. At doctoral universities, about seven in ten had general education requirements applicable to all students.
- Seventy percent of baccalaureate colleges require all students to spend 35 percent or more of classroom hours on general education. Slightly more than one-third of doctoral institutions and half of comprehensive institutions have such requirements.
- Western civilization courses are required for all students at forty-five percent of colleges and universities. Study of world civilizations is required by an equal portion (43 percent).
- Only 15 percent of all institutions require foreign language study for all students. Foreign languages are required at nearly one-third (31 percent) of baccalaureate colleges.

## Beyond the Bachelor's Degree: Graduates in the Humanities

### *ENROLLMENT IN GRADUATE EDUCATION*

Graduates in the humanities have one of the highest rates of enrollment in postbaccalaureate education (NCES, 1989).[5] In a survey of 1986 graduates one to two years after graduation:

- Almost four in ten humanities graduates (38 percent) had enrolled in postbaccalaureate education (figure 4). Among all graduates, 28 percent were in postbaccalaureate programs.
- In a comparison by undergraduate major, humanities majors had one of the highest rates of graduate enrollment. Only biology majors (61 percent) and psychology majors (42 percent) were more likely to be enrolled in graduate study.

In 1991, the Consortium on Financing Higher Education surveyed the educational and occupational patterns of alumni seven years after college graduation. Compared with graduates in other fields, humanities graduates had similar rates of enrollment in postbaccalaureate education.

- Thirty percent of humanities graduates from the class of 1984 had enrolled in a master's degree program; 43 percent had earned or were earning an MBA, law, or first-professional degree.
- Eighteen percent of social science graduates were earning or had earned a master's degree; 58 percent were earning first-professional degrees.
- Business graduates were found overwhelmingly in professional programs (72 percent). Sixteen percent had enrolled in or had earned master's degrees in arts and sciences or in nonprofessional fields.
- A large portion (20 percent) of humanities graduates were studying at the doctoral level. Among other fields, 20 percent of social science graduates were enrolled in doctoral programs, as were seven percent of business majors.

Until the mid-1980s, no major analysis was done on the number of students enrolled in graduate programs by field of study.

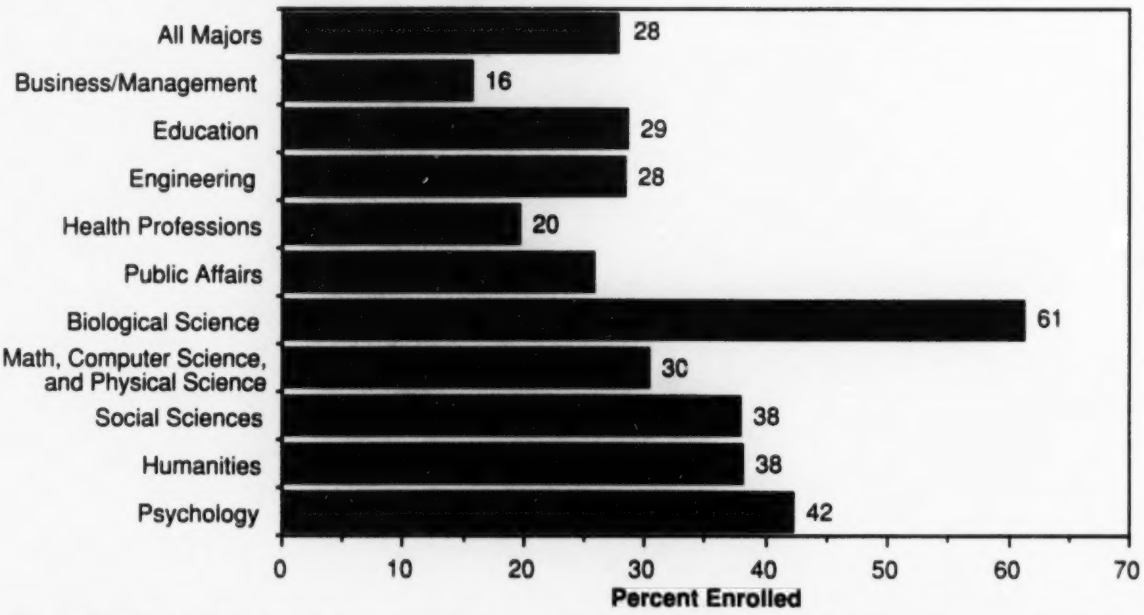
- Between 1986 and 1989, graduate enrollment in the humanities and arts increased by 9 percent, from 67,000 to 73,000 students (Syverson, 1991).

Increased graduate enrollment in the humanities and arts does not necessarily yield an increase in the number of graduate degrees conferred. Unlike the trend seen in humanities bacclaureates over the past decade, the number of graduate degrees awarded over this period has not followed a general pattern.

- Between 1981 and 1990, the number of master's degrees earned in the humanities increased by 6 percent, from 11,259 to 11,978. Master's degrees in foreign languages fell by 5 percent. In history,

**Figure 4**

Early Enrollment in Graduate Education, by Bachelor's Degree Major




**Source:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Occupational and Educational Outcomes of 1985-86 Bachelor's Degree Recipients, August 1989.*

master's degrees rose by 5 percent, and in English, by 10 percent.

- At the doctoral level, the number of degrees in the humanities declined by 7 percent, from 2,998 to 2,781. Foreign language doctorates fell by 13 percent, history, by 11 percent, and English, by 7 percent.

The National Research Council's report on earned doctorates gives similar data for the largest humanities fields. At the doctoral level, history degrees declined by 12 percent between 1981 and 1990, while the combined total for language and literature degrees fell by 8 percent.

### *EARLY CAREERS*

Graduates with humanities bachelor's degrees are found in a wide variety of occupations in their first years out of college (NCES, 1989). According to a study tracking 1985-86 college graduates one to two years after graduation, one of the most popular occupational fields was education (figure 5).[6]

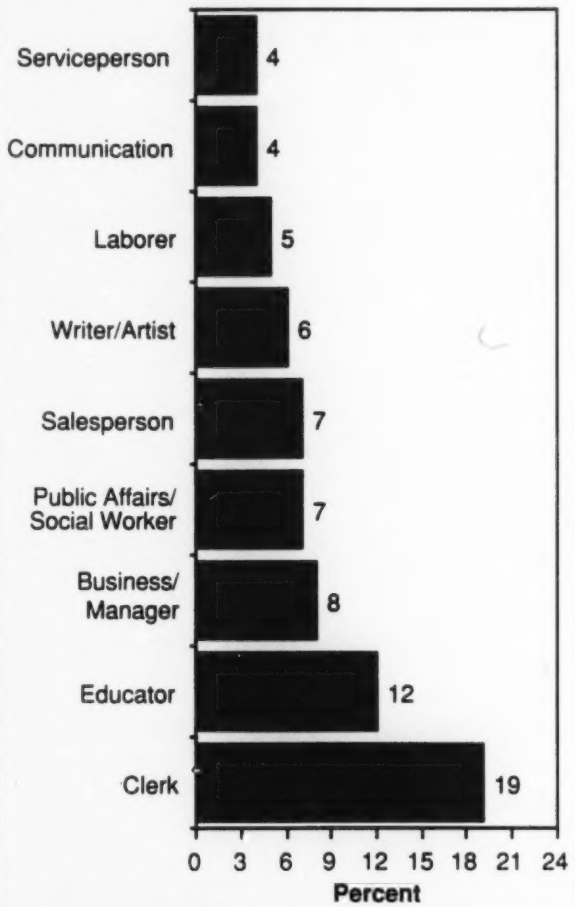
- Twelve percent of humanities graduates were in education, presumably choosing teaching as an early career.
- Nineteen percent of recent graduates held administrative support and other clerical positions. This is consistent with the percentage of recent graduates from other fields who are working in support positions. Among public affairs/social services graduates, 19 percent were doing clerical work. Fifteen percent of social science graduates held clerical positions.
- Overall, 80 percent of recent humanities graduates were employed. Of those not working, 55 percent were enrolled in graduate programs. Among all recent college graduates, 86 percent were working; of those not working, 57 percent were enrolled in graduate programs.
- Seventy-four percent of social science graduates were employed, as were 90 percent of business majors.
- In these early careers, about half (55 percent) of humanities graduates reported that their job was related to their field of study. This is lower than the average for all arts and sciences graduates (65 percent).
  - — Among graduates in professional fields, 85 percent were working in occupations related to their field of study.

In accordance with other studies comparing salaries by college major, earnings of recent humanities graduates on average were much lower than those of business graduates (NCES, 1989).

- Two years after graduation, humanities majors earned an average annual salary of $16,200. Business graduates reported earnings of $21,100; social science majors, $20,300.

**Figure 5**

Early Occupations of 1985-86 Humanities Graduates*




*Includes only those occupations in which at least 3 percent of graduates were employed.

**Source:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Occupational and Educational Outcomes of 1985-86 Bachelor's Degree Recipients, August 1989.*

Along with salary earnings, job satisfaction is an important consideration in any study of employment outcomes. A study on the early careers of humanities majors found:

- Among college-educated workers, job satisfaction centered primarily on being intellectually challenged and only secondarily on earnings (Sharp and Weidman, 1989).
- Despite earning lower salaries, recent humanities graduates were as satisfied with their work as recent graduates in other fields.
- While early careers should be recognized as providing important experience, they are by no means a final destination.

*LONG-TERM OUTCOMES*

Because first jobs may often be chosen as a chance to explore a career, they do not offer a complete picture of career outcomes and patterns. Better impressions can be derived ten to fifteen years after graduation, when definitive career paths have been established.

Unfortunately, no systematic way to track the occupation patterns of humanities graduates has been devised. Other than education, there is no one field to which they are typically drawn. Longitudinal studies of alumni offer a sense of the employment and education patterns of humanities graduates.[7] In 1988, Georgetown University coordinated a study of 30,000 alumni from 24 private colleges and universities, looking at graduates' first jobs and current jobs. This offers a look at employment five to thirty-five years after college graduation.

- Among English graduates, 23 percent currently were in education, 18 percent held managerial positions, and 13 percent were writers, artists, entertainers, or athletes (Georgetown, 1989).
- History graduates were found typically in three fields—sixty percent were evenly distributed in legal, management, and education occupations.

Foreign language graduates were employed in a wide variety of career fields.

- One-quarter of foreign language graduates were working in education. Another 17 percent worked in management positions, and nearly a quarter were in "other" occupations.

The same occupational fields were mentioned as first jobs for each of these majors. In addition, administrative support was listed frequently as a first job upon graduation.

Another means of assessing humanities degrees is to consider the educational backgrounds of graduates with successful careers. In 1981, AT&T released a study of successful managers hired in the mid-1950s and tracked for over twenty years.

- Humanities and social sciences graduates were found to progress through the lower levels of management at the same rate as their peers with business or engineering degrees. With time, however, differences emerged.
- After two decades with their company, 45 percent of the humanities and social sciences graduates had reached the upper levels of middle management, compared with 21 percent of the engineering graduates and 32 percent of the business graduates (Beck, 1981).[8]

Similar findings resulted from a later longitudinal study of managerial performance done in the 1970s. Humanities and social science majors had the best overall performance, particularly in interpersonal and verbal skills (Howard, 1986).

- Graduates in the humanities and social sciences exceeded business, engineering, and math/science graduates in decision-making skills, creativity in solving business problems, intellectual ability, range of interests, and written communication skills. They also received the highest marks for advancement motivation, although business majors were not far behind.
- Likelihood of promotion was highest for humanities and social science majors. By the fourth year of the study, humanities and social science majors had progressed the furthest, followed closely by business majors.

Demand for technical majors and the low competition for liberal arts majors might suggest that AT&T was able to recruit top-ranked liberal arts majors but only average technical majors. While this may be understandable in today's "high tech" market, it does not explain the consistency between the 1970s study and the 1950s study. Furthermore, comparisons of undergraduate grade point averages for AT&T managers show that the engineers hired were no less qualified than the humanities and social sciences majors (Howard, 1986).

These studies suggest that higher percentages of upper-level managers will hold liberal arts degrees. In 1984, Illinois Bell Telephone Company published a study of its managers, divided into seven levels of management. Consistently, the percentage of managers with liberal arts degrees increased by level of management.

- At the two highest levels, 60 percent of managers were liberal arts graduates. At the fourth and first (lowest) level, the figures were 27 percent and 6 percent (Useem, 1986).

Recently, the business community has begun to voice greater interest in liberal arts graduates. Business executives have long espoused the value of a liberal arts education. However, they are most likely not involved with the recruiting and hiring of entry-level workers, and thus the success of humanities majors in moving up through the ranks is all the more notable.

A rapidly changing economy is creating more demand for skills traditionally associated with liberal arts graduates. The structural shifts from a goods-producing economy to a service-producing economy will bring about a greater need for "technical, communication, adaptability, management, problem-solving, and influencing skills" (Ottinger, 1992).

- Separate reviews of the business and academic communities commissioned by the New Jersey Department of Higher Education show that the two groups share similar educational goals for graduates. These include quantitative and verbal literacy, intellectual breadth, cultural breadth, and sensitivity to the needs of others (Daly, 1992).
- An ability to pull together information from across disciplinary boundaries is gaining value in today's world, as is the ability to respond quickly to change (Daly, 1992).

Interpersonal skills are taking on new urgency as the workforce becomes increasingly culturally diverse and the economy is more globally diverse. As managers are called upon to play a greater role in social and political arenas, a liberal arts background is becoming an important investment in human capital.

- A survey of 113 business executives identified the most important skills for success in the corporate arena as communication skills, analytical ability, interpersonal skills, and mathematical skills (Warren, 1983).
- Written and verbal communication skills likewise were found to be the top-ranked factors in determining graduates' success in the job-entry market, according to a survey of 428 personnel directors at U.S. businesses, and governmental agencies (Curtis, et. al., 1988).

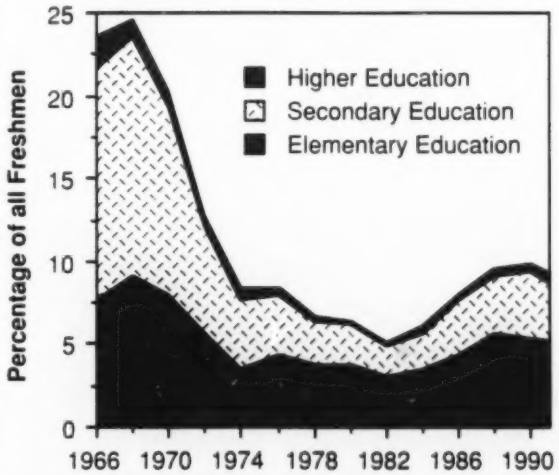
### *HUMANITIES GRADUATES AS EDUCATORS*

While the majority of college graduates look to private industry for employment, historically, a large percentage of humanities graduates have turned to education. Changes in teaching opportunities must be recognized for their influence on the number of humanities degrees earned. In fact, during the last two decades, freshman interest in education careers shows a pattern remarkably similar to the number of bachelor's degrees granted in the humanities (figure 6).

Demographic changes and stronger requirements in teacher education will affect career opportunities in the 1990s. Demand for teachers is expected to rise to its highest level in twenty years, while the supply of teachers is expected to drop, due to retirements and low numbers of new teachers (Carnegie, 1986).

**Figure 6**

Freshman Interest in Education Careers




**Source:** Dey, Astin, and Korn. *The American Freshman: Twenty-Five Year Trends*. Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, Los Angeles, September, 1991.

In addition, higher standards for teacher education graduates will impact the labor market for teaching. The Carnegie Forum, the Holmes Group, and the Association of American Colleges are all calling for a stronger liberal arts background for teachers. Those institutions that make up the Holmes Group require prospective teachers to earn a bachelor's degree in a liberal arts field and a master's degree in education. The Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges for Teacher Education (AILACTE) also promotes traditional liberal learning programs for teachers. In fact, much of the renewed interest in teaching is occurring on liberal arts campuses (Timpane, 1990).

## IMPLICATIONS

Over the past nine years, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in the humanities has been increasing slowly and steadily. This is good news after the dramatic declines during the 1970s and early 1980s, when humanities degrees fell to record low levels. However, the double-digit increase primarily reflects the small number of humanities degrees earned in 1981. Current numbers on humanities degrees are still very low. Furthermore, 1990 figures on baccalaureates in the humanities are 40 percent below the levels of 1971.

The extent of the recovery in the humanities remains to be seen. Some of the renewed interest in the humanities over the past nine years can be attributed to economic prosperity of the late 1980s. A strong economy made students more willing to major in fields that did not necessarily lead directly to employment. More than half (54 percent) of respondents in a survey of 505 middle and senior managers agreed that "during a period of workforce reduction, the hiring of liberal arts graduates is more adversely affected than other graduates" (Useem, 1989). As we continue into the 1990s, students are facing an unstable job market and diminishing opportunities for financial aid. In today's economic climate, students once again may turn from the humanities toward specialized majors with less ambiguous career relevance.

Yet it is important to stress how applicable humanities skills are in business. Through study of the humanities, students develop an understanding of how to integrate, apply, and communicate knowledge. The strong showing of humanities graduates in private industry supports the "real life" applicability of skills developed through study of the humanities. In today's rapidly changing global economy, these skills are increasingly valuable.

While the general skills of humanities graduates are gaining regard in the labor market, the humanities remain in a precarious situation. According to the annual freshman survey, students are enrolling with different goals and values than they had twenty-five years ago. Institutions need to thoroughly address the implications of such changes; they need to consider how they will frame the value of a liberal arts education in their overall mission and to their students.

The situation is a serious one for colleges and universities. As institutions face growing financial pressures, courses for which student demand is low may possibly face reductions in availability and allocation of resources. Colleges and universities may be driven to evaluate to what extent they will be able or want to refrain from following market trends. This brings up issues such as:

— What role will institutions play in supporting study in the humanities?

— If students generally are interested in career-oriented fields of study, how can financially-strapped institutions continue to support good departments in humanities fields?

— How strong is the commitment to breadth of liberal education in the curriculum?

The high enrollment rates in postbaccalaureate education among humanities is another topic which demands further attention. Additional research might focus on a comprehensive analysis of the reasons behind the high rate of enrollment: a lifelong interest in learning instilled through the humanities; an inability to find satisfactory employment with a humanities baccalaureate degree; a view of the humanities as a good pre-professional major.

Lastly, institutions, corporations, and professions are best able to plan for the future if they have a clear understanding of recent and current occupational and educational trends. To analyze these trends, precise and up-to-date information is essential. Particularly needed for the study of humanities degrees is data that can be broken down by specific major. One recurring issue in this research brief is the lack of a standard definition for the humanities fields. It is impossible to come up with any conclusions about humanities majors in general if the fields being compared are continually changing. To the extent that is possible, this report relies on the humanities fields that comprise the National Endowment for the Humanities. However, the National Center for Education Statistics includes different fields in its classification of the humanities. If statistical data were available by individual field, then it would be possible to analyze the same fields consistently.

## ENDNOTES

1 Many of these same trends have occurred in other liberal arts fields. However, this discussion is limited to the humanities, to the extent that the data allow.

2 Throughout the text, "English" refers to the total of general English and literature degrees.

3 Because NCES does not collect information on race/ethnicity by individual majors, this information is based on the larger subfields. History degrees (about one-quarter of all humanities degrees) are not included here; they are imbedded in the social sciences. Including the social sciences would nearly double the total number of degrees, and history only comprises about 18% of the social sciences. Likewise, music and art history are excluded because they are grouped under visual and performing arts.

4 Disaggregated data for history majors was not available until 1977. From 1966-1976, history and political science were grouped together.

5 History majors are not included in humanities in this NCES survey, but are included among the social sciences.

6 This 1987 publication contains the most recent data available from the National Center for Education Statistics on the activities of college graduates disaggregated by major field of study.

7 Several studies looking at liberal arts graduates are included here, for two reasons: the humanities are a subset of liberal arts, and liberal arts graduates generally face the same concerns as humanities graduates regarding the usefulness of their degree.

8 The author of the AT&T study cautioned that this group difference is not statistically significant. He concluded that humanities and social science majors show strong managerial skills and are no less successful in business careers than business and engineering majors.

## RESOURCES

1) The major source of data on enrollment and degrees is the National Center for Education Statistics. The *Digest of Education Statistics* provides information on degrees conferred, with breakdowns by level of study, gender, field of study, and, to a limited extent, race/ethnicity. For more information, contact the National Center for Education Statistics, Education Information Branch, (800) 424-1616. To order the *Digest*, contact the Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402, (202) 275-3054.

2) The Higher Education Research Institute at University of California, Los Angeles, conducts an annual survey of first-time full-time freshmen. Information is collected by institutional type and control, with data tabulated separately for all freshmen, women, and men. In 1991, a compilation of twenty-five year trends was published. For further information, contact the Higher Education Research Institute, Graduate School of Education, 320 Moore Hall, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1521, (310) 825-1925.

3) The Association of American Colleges (AAC) promotes liberal learning and institutions committed to liberal learning. Their publication *Those Who Can: Undergraduate Programs to Prepare Arts and Sciences Majors for Teaching* discusses efforts to draw liberal arts graduates into teaching. In addition, the Association is compiling a curriculum database from college transcripts at 200 colleges and universities nationwide. It was available for the first time in 1992 and will be updated every two years.

4) Michael Useem, Director of the Center for Applied Social Science at Boston University, has done extensive research on liberal arts graduates in the corporate world. Since three-quarters of college graduates take their first job with a company, Useem's *Liberal Education and the Corporation* provides extremely pertinent information. Recruitment of liberal arts graduates, changing needs of corporate leadership, and educational culture in corporations are some of its topics.

5) In 1988, the Office of Planning and Institutional Research at Georgetown University sponsored a survey of over 30,000 alumni at twenty-four private colleges and universities. Alumni had graduated between five and thirty-five years prior to the survey, at five-year intervals. Questions focused on undergraduate records, advanced degrees, employment, and avocational activities. For additional information about the survey, contact Joseph Pettit, Vice President for Planning, Georgetown University, Room 303, Maguire Hall, Washington, D.C. 20057, (202) 687-3587.

6) The Consortium on Financing Higher Education, representing a group of highly selective colleges and universities, surveyed 6,000 alumni in 1991. This follow-up survey of 1984 college

graduates covered issues such as employment, education, attitudes, and student loan debts. The final analysis is still in progress. For more information on the survey, contact Larry Litten, Consortium on Financing Higher Education, 238 Main Street, Suite 307, Cambridge, MA 02142, (617) 258-8280.

7) The Modern Language Association of America regularly surveys college and university English programs. The first survey, done in 1984, gathered information on faculty size, enrollments, and course offerings. The 1985 follow-up survey focused on the character of the English major and general education requirements in English. The third survey, done in 1990, gathered data for effective departmental planning in the 1990s. Topics include: characteristics of full-time and part-time faculty, expected retirements, hiring plans, and undergraduate enrollments. The Modern Language Association also maintains a database on the employment of new doctorates in English and foreign languages. The survey was first done in 1977, and most recently in 1987. For more information on either of these resources, contact the Modern Language Association of America, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003, (212) 475-9500.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY


Beck, Robert E. "The Liberal Arts Major in Bell System Management." In *Quality in Liberal Learning: Curricular Innovations in Higher Education*, edited by Katherine S. Guroff. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges, 1981.

Carleton College, Office of Institutional Research. Northfield, Minnesota. Unpublished tabulations from alumni survey, 1989.

Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, Task Force on Teaching as a Profession. *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*. New York: Canregie Corporation, 1986.

Cheney, Lynne V. *Fifty Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students*. Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1989.

_____. *Humanities in America*. Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1988.

Curtis, Dan, Jerry Wisner, and Ronald Stephens. "A Survey of Business Preferences for College Grads." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association, New Orleans, November 1988.

Daly, William T. "The Academy, the Economy, and the Liberal Arts." *Academe* (July-August) 1992: 10-12.

Dey, Eric, Alexander Astin, and William Korn. *The American Freshman: Twenty-Five Year Trends*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, 1991.

El-Khawas, Elaine. *Campus Trends, 1992*. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1992.

_____. *Campus Trends, 1990*. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1990.

Georgetown University, Office of Planning and Research. Washington, D.C. Unpublished tabulations from alumni survey, 1988.

Howard, Ann. "College Experiences and Managerial Performance." *Journal of Applied Psychology* (March 1986): 530-552.

Johnston, Joseph S. Jr. and Associates. *Those Who Can: Undergraduate Programs to Prepare Arts and Sciences Majors for Teaching*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges, 1989.

National Research Council. *Doctorate Recipients from United States Universities: Summary Report 1990*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1991.

Ottinger, Cecilia. *What is the Service Sector?* American Council on Education's Research Brief Series, vol. 3, no. 4. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1992.

Sharp, Laure M. and John C. Weidman. "Early Careers of Undergraduate Humanities Majors." *Journal of Higher Education* (September/October) 1989: 544-564.

Syverson, Peter D. and Stephen R. Welch. *Graduate Enrollment and Degrees: 1986-1989*. Washington, D.C.: Council of Graduate Schools, 1991.

Timpane, P. Michael. "Rediscovering the Teacher." In *A View from the Top*, edited by Thomas Warren. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1990.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Education Statistics, 1992*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1992.

_____."Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS)." U.S. Department of Education. Unpublished data tabulations, 1970-1982.

_____. "Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS)." U.S. Department of Education. Unpublished data tabulations, 1988.

_____. *Occupational and Educational Outcomes of 1985-86 Bachelor's Degree Recipients*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1989.

_____. *Racial/Ethnic Trends in Degrees Conferred by Institutions of Higher Education: 1980-81 through 1989-90*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1992.

Useem, Michael. "What the Research Shows." In *Educating Managers: Executive Effectiveness Through Liberal Learning*, edited by Joseph S. Johnston, Jr. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986.

_____. *Liberal Education and the Corporation*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1989.

Warren, Russell G. *New Links Between General Education and Business Careers*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges, 1983.

Wingard, Tamara L., Eric Dey, and William Korn. *The American College Student, 1990: National Norms for 1986 and 1990 Freshmen*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, 1991.


## The ACE Research Briefs Series

The Division of Policy Analysis and Research at the American Council on Education publishes the ACE Research Brief Series, a collection of short papers exploring timely and pertinent issues in higher education. Current topics include trends in retention data and practices, academic collective bargaining, and international comparisons of higher education expenditures and participation. The series is published eight times a year and is available for $58 for one year, $106 for two years, or $149 for three years. ACE members receive a 10 percent discount.

*Elaine El-Khawas, Vice President, Policy Analysis and Research*

*Cecilia Ottinger, Editor, Research Briefs Series*


## American Council on Education Executive Committee, 1992

Hoke L. Smith, President, Towson State University, *Chair*

Edward A. Malloy, CSC, President, University of Notre Dame, *Vice Chair*

Robert L. Albright, President, Johnson C. Smith University, *Immediate Past Chair*

Juliet V. Garcia, President, Univeristy of Texas at Brownsville, *Secretary*

Johnnetta B. Cole, President, Spelman College

Thomas Ehrlich, President, Indiana University

Thomas Gonzales, President, Front Range Community College

Robert H. Atwell, American Council on Education, *President*